



PANDEMIC-EBT IN CALIFORNIA: LESSONS AND OPPORTUNITIES TO END CHILDHOOD HUNGER

Executive Summary, March 2021

During the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic in California, 30% of households with children were food insecure, with Hispanic households with children (37%), and Black households with children (34%) experiencing a disproportionate impact. Thanks to Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, Rep. Zoe Lofgren, and other California leaders, Congress created Pandemic-EBT (P-EBT), an emergency school meal replacement nutrition benefit, in the Families First Act. The benefit was loaded onto an Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card for children who lost access to school meals due to school campus closures. California issued nearly \$1.4 billion in P-EBT benefits to nearly 4 million kids — a 95% reach rate across 58 counties.

Through a survey and interviews with P-EBT recipients and stakeholders, the impact of P-EBT was examined from recipients' perspectives. The survey received nearly 1,400 responses in English, Spanish, and Chinese from across California, and in-depth interviews were conducted with 19 P-EBT recipients and 12 key stakeholders.

How did Pandemic EBT impact your family?

(Respondents were permitted multiple responses.)

55%

P-EBT reduced our worries in paying other household expenses like rent, electricity, or the phone bill

55%

P-EBT let us stretch our food budget for our whole family

43%

P-EBT gave us enough food benefits to pay for meals for my child/ren when they would have been in school

“I was able to nourish my kids with P-EBT. I have trouble getting to food giveaways or school lunch pickups because I’m disabled and can’t drive.”

- P-EBT recipient

Policy Recommendations

P-EBT was a temporary policy to address the inequities exacerbated by the pandemic and will continue to exist if we do not create permanent changes. Let's take the lessons learned from the design of P-EBT and the developments of the pandemic to update policies that meet families where they are.

Improve the P-EBT Experience for Families:

1. Create clear messaging about P-EBT eligibility and Public Charge for immigrant communities.
2. Expand P-EBT customer service opportunities.
3. Translate all P-EBT related materials and information in all threshold languages, and invite community participation in verifying accuracy of translations.

Maximize the Opportunity of P-EBT:

4. Implement the 15% P-EBT benefit boost to re-calculate and increase P-EBT benefits.
5. Ensure robust engagement by all education stakeholders.

Leverage Other Anti-Hunger Programs:

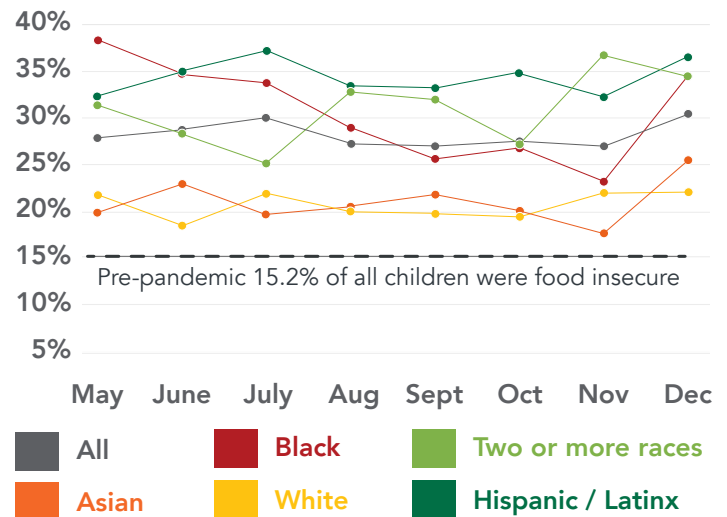
6. Create strong avenues to connect P-EBT recipients to existing food programs such as CalFresh.
7. Simplify and expand CalFresh eligibility.
8. Provide universal school meals to all children.
9. Implement out-of-school-time EBT.

Key Findings

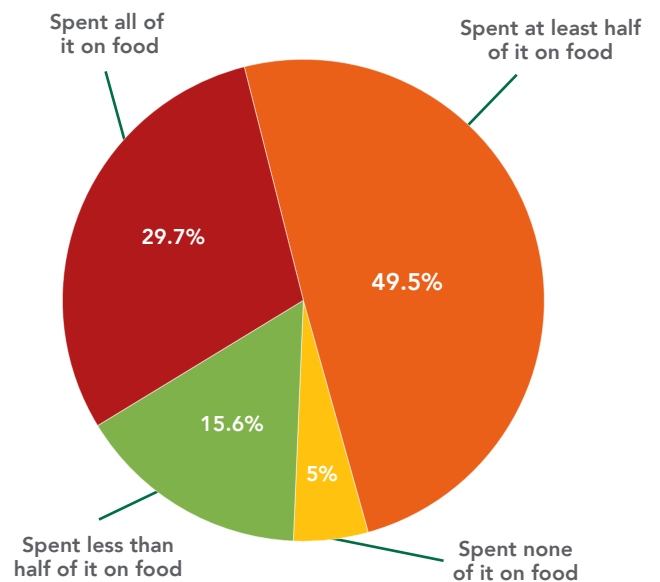
- Most survey respondents first heard about P-EBT through an announcement from their child's school or school district, underscoring the importance of schools as trusted, effective messengers for P-EBT.
- Our survey revealed the vital combination of P-EBT and school meals for families with children. Across our survey data and interviews with P-EBT recipients, school meals remained a main food resource for families.
- Across all languages, over half of P-EBT recipients who responded to our survey were not already on CalFresh at the time they received P-EBT benefits, and when asked why they weren't on CalFresh, nearly half responded that they were "worried about using government programs."
- Across all languages, respondents had similar issues, questions, and concerns about P-EBT. When asked about concerns, the top two answers were "hard to set up PIN" and "tried calling the P-EBT phone number but couldn't get through."
- During the first few months of the pandemic, about 80% of respondents reported that their income went down "a lot" or "lost all" of their income. The majority of survey respondents — 65% stated using all or at least half of their stimulus checks (\$1200 federal Economic Impact Payment or \$500 state Disaster Relief Assistance for Immigrants) to buy food during the early months of the pandemic.
- P-EBT not only helped families to keep their children nourished and healthy — it also eased other financial burdens for families and enabled everyone in the household to have enough food. Over half of respondents said that P-EBT "reduced our worries in paying other household expenses like rent, electricity or the phone bill," and that P-EBT "let us stretch our food budget for our whole family."
- P-EBT represented a temporary sense of security. Over 66% of survey respondents stated that P-EBT was not enough to feed their families, and that they had to use additional food resources to stretch their food budgets.

In December 2020, more than 30% of households with children in California were food insecure:

(Northwestern University Analysis of Census Pulse Survey Data)



P-EBT Recipients who received a stimulus payment (federal or DRAI) spent at least half on food:



"We have long known that children are hungriest when school meals aren't available. Pandemic EBT showed that we can change this, and get vital food assistance to children in need. We can't go back — we must ensure that EBT is a permanent solution for out of school times to permanently fight child hunger."

-Etienne Melcher Philbin, Deputy Director of School and Out-of-School Time Programs, Food Research & Action Center

Read the full report: cafoodbanks.org/pandemic-ebt-report

